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ABSTRACT

A survey examined the reading and writing practices, educational attitudes, and family background of 38 Mexican-American fathers with children in grades K-2 in Los Angeles County public schools. Literacy practices examined included reading and writing within and outside the home, alone, or with their children. Subjects were divided into four groups based on generation in the United States (second through fifth). Most fathers, irrespective of generation status, engaged in literacy activities and viewed parents and schools as having joint responsibility for children's education. Fathers' reading and writing activities were not related to generation status or socioeconomic status, but were related to the father's length of time on present job, prior job training, and role at home. Compared to other fathers, those who shared child-care tasks with their wives were more likely to engage in literacy activities, particularly joint literacy activities with their children. (SV)

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UNPACKAGING THE EFFECTS OF GENERATION AND SES
ON EARLY LITERACY PRACTICES OF
MEXICAN AMERICAN FATHERS¹

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A disproportionate number of Hispanic/Latino students are not achieving as well academically as some other cultural groups (Arias, 1986; Roos, 1987; Humphreys, 1988; Orfield, 1986; De La Rosa & Maw, 1990). Myriad explanations have been proposed. These include differences in cognitive styles between Hispanic/Latino and mainstream groups, low academic standards inherent in Hispanic/Latino families, differences in English language proficiency, and low SES factors.

One explanation that has received increased attention has been the role of early family literacy opportunities and practices. For mainstream groups, such as Euro Americans, family literacy opportunities and experiences are known to affect early reading achievement of young children (Cazden, 1988; Taylor, 1983; Rogoff, 1990). Home-based literacy experiences that appear to be associated with early reading success in school include children having their own books; being read to frequently and hearing story records; using the library; being encouraged to write and read frequently; and having parents who role model literacy activities.

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Given the low incidence of such factors reported by some studies (CTB/McGraw-Hill, 1982, 1987, 1988; Laosa, 1982; Teale, 1986), a number of investigators have suggested that the lack of early literacy experiences may be contributing to the academic disparities of Hispanic/Latino youth.

However, the connection of family literacy practices in Hispanic/Latino households and poor achievement has not been thoroughly investigated, and significant questions remain. Principle among these is the tendency of many investigations to treat the Hispanic/Latino population as a single homogeneous group. By failing to take into account various demographic, social, and cultural variables, there is a risk that important within group variation may be overlooked.

One such crucial example is generation status, which is not always examined in studies of familial literacy practices. Yet, generation is plausibly a source of variation in literacy events. For instance, Mexican Americans rank order values in significantly different ways depending on generation; later generations display greater similarity to mainstream groups (Domino & Acosta, 1987; Knight & Kagan, 1977). This phenomena suggests a general acculturation process which implies that longer "exposure" of Mexican heritage individuals to U.S. society is associated with acquisition of its values, practices, and beliefs.

If later generations of Mexican Americans display values shared with mainstream groups, it is also reasonable to expect that they may have begun to adopt the literacy practices know to affect early school achievement. This situation suggests that studies of family literacy in Hispanic/Latino households must consider how long or how exposed parents have been to U.S. society, and thus to opportunities for having adopted its practices and beliefs.

A simple, inexpensive method to assess "exposure" or opportunity to acquire literacy practices known to affect achievement is to determine generation status. In general, the hypothesis would be the later the generation, the more likely a family would create early literacy opportunities and engage in literacy practices with young children that may increase the chances of school success.

However, generation is a crude index of the process that is presumed to be operating in the connection between early literacy practices/opportunities and later school achievement. It is in Whiting's words (1980), a "packed" variable. It is "packed" with many other factors that may or may not reflect the presumed underlying dynamics linking family practices and achievement.

In particular, if generational status is significantly related to the child rearing behavior of parents, then what parental behaviors and what child experiences must be specified. However, until we empirically specify the links of generation to parental behavior to experiences that could plausibly influence a child's literacy development, generation remains a "packed" variable. We know it somehow affects children, but the processes remain "packed" away and unknown.

An alternative is to "unpackage" generation by identifying a variable or variables that more directly assess the presumed underlying process of parent-child interaction. The study reported here discovered through extended interviewing one such variable: The marital role relationship of fathers. Through open-ended interviews, it was discovered that fathers who "shared" child rearing duties with their wives, as opposed to "dividing" these responsibilities, are more likely to be engaged in early literacy practices with their young children.

Although a slight trend was found for later generation fathers to do more "sharing" with their wives, it is their role behavior-not their families' length of

time in the U.S.- that represents a plausible way that differences among Mexican American families mediate differential literacy development. Even among 2nd generation fathers, there were many who "shared" child care duties. Thus, in this study, generation status only crudely reflected a variable (i.e., father's marital role) that may be part of the mediating process in early literacy development in Mexican American households.

The discovery of a link between paternal role relationship and literacy practices confirmed the original decision of focusing on Mexican American fathers. Fathers were chosen as subjects because, (1) research on parental contribution to children's literacy development, generally, focuses on the relationship between mother and child (National Academy of Sciences, 1982; Laosa, 1978). (2) Familism (i.e., the family as the center of sociocultural activity) is a salient, Hispanic cultural trait (Vega, 1990). Although fathers hold an important position within the Mexican American family, the relationship between father, child, and literacy activity has virtually gone unexplored (for example, see Laosa, 1982). (3) Recent research (Gallimore, Reese, Balzano, Benson & Goldenberg, 1991) on immigrant, Hispanic/Latino families suggest a positive relationship between the amount of literacy fathers engage on their job, and their children's kindergarten reading tests' scores.

METHOD

Subjects

The sample consisted of 38 Mexican American fathers who were recruited from a school district located within the County of Los Angeles. Spouses of the subjects were Mexican American with children enrolled in public elementary schools (i.e., K, 1st or 2nd). Four of the fathers were eliminated due to various reasons (e.g., moved from area, etc.). Eight fathers were interviewed in the form

of case studies, and certain demographic information was not obtained, such as income, education, job status, etc. The remaining 26 subjects were divided into four generational groups². SES, based on education and occupation status³, included 15 working and 11 middle-class parents.

Procedure

A 60 item questionnaire was developed by reviewing the literature on the Mexican American family, and factors that may impact academic achievement, such as SES, discrimination, and educational values.

The questionnaire was divided into two sections. Section I contained 40 items on factors such as demographic and family background. Section II contained 20 items focusing on father's literacy practices. Various aspects of literacy were examined for this study (Table 1). They include reading and writing within and outside the home, and literacy engaged in by fathers alone, and with their children. In addition, the frequency (how often) and context (social prompt) of literacy were investigated.

²2nd gen=11; 3rd gen=10; 4th gen=2; 5th gen=3.

³SES classifications adapted from Hollingshead's, *Two-Factor Index of Social Position*.

Table 1

Father's Report on Literacy Activity

Within Home (frequency) (context)	Outside Home (frequency) (context)
Alone (frequency) (context)	With/TC (frequency) (context)
Frequency (coded) Daily=5 3-4 x wk=4 1 x wk=3 1-2 x mth=2 1-2 x yr=1	Context (coded) work library school religion recreation other

Items in sections I and II of the questionnaire were measured by using a variety of open-ended questions, yes-no responses, and Likert-type scales. Information gathered on father's literacy activity was based on self-report statements.

With the assistance of school principals, letters describing the study and requesting volunteers were sent home with the children. Fathers returning the attached response form were subsequently contacted, and interview appointments scheduled at that time. Each interview was approximately an hour and a half to two hours in length, and were audio taped.

RESULTS

Generation and Literacy

The findings demonstrate that a majority of fathers reported engaging in literacy activity, irrespective of generation status. Tables 2a and 2b suggest that

the sample of parents have made reading and writing a part of their daily experiences. Not surprisingly, because of the lack of variance in literacy use, there were no significant correlations between generation and frequency. There was a slight non-significant, negative trend, though, between generation level and fathers' reading practices with their children. However, it ran counter to predictions since the earlier the generation the more reading was reported.

Table 2a

**GENERATIONAL COMPARISON OF FATHERS'
LITERACY EXPERIENCES WITH TARGET CHILD**
(Results based on a "yes"-"no" response)

Setting	Generation								
	2nd (N=11)		3rd (N=10)		4th & 5th (N=5)				
	(F)	(%)	(F)	(%)	(F)	(%)	r	DF	P
Reading w/tc. Outside home	10	91	10	100	5	100	-.193	24	NS
Writing w/tc. Outside home	8	73	7	70	5	100	-.141	24	NS
Reading w/tc. Within home	11	100	10	100	5	100	-.117	24	NS
Writing w/tc. Within home	10	91	9	90	4	80	-.023	24	NS

Table 2b

**GENERATIONAL COMPARISON OF FATHERS'
LITERACY EXPERIENCES ALONE**
(Results based on a "yes"-"no" response)

Setting	Generation								
	2nd (N=11)		3rd (N=10)		4th & 5th (N=5)		r	DF	P
	(F)	(%)	(F)	(%)	(F)	(%)			
Reading alone Outside home	11	100	10	100	5	100	.276	24	NS
Writing alone Outside home	11	100	10	100	5	100	.193	24	NS
Reading alone within home	11	100	10	100	5	100	-.175	24	NS
Writing alone within home	10	91	10	100	5	100	-.031	24	NS

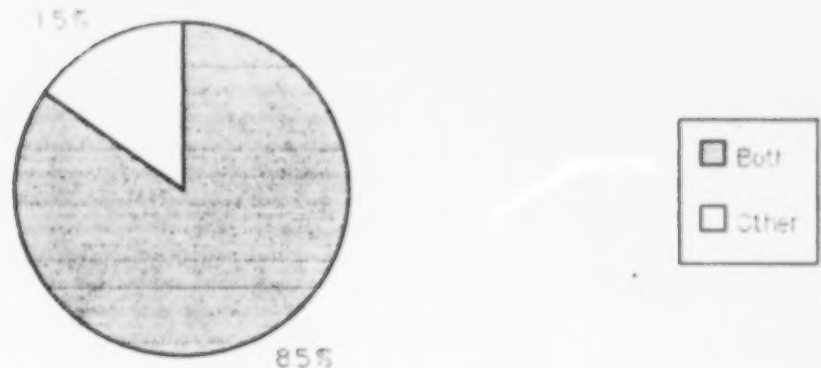
Generation and Educational Beliefs

Parental beliefs about their responsibility to help schools educate their children was also assessed. Again, generation status can act as a source of variation when it involves values. Later U.S. born parents may have begun to adopt mainstream educational practices in assuming more responsibility in helping their children with school work by interacting with teachers and staff, and inquiring as to their children's progress.

However, figure 1 indicates that generation status is not related to parental beliefs. As early as second generation, a majority of fathers view parents and schools as playing important roles in the education of their children. That is, they believe that both groups have a joint responsibility to introduce, clarify, and reinforce curriculum children receive in class. The teachers inability to adequately spend sufficient time with each child, due to the burgeoning number of students currently in classrooms, was the reason most often cited by fathers for the dual partnership.

Figure 1

Responsibility for Academic Teaching
and Assistance of Children



Note! **Both**=Schools and parents. **Other**=Various combinations of parental or school involvement.

Early Literacy Activity

Given that the findings, thus far, indicate that the majority of fathers hold strong beliefs towards parental participation in their children's academic development, is there a relationship between beliefs and practices. Stated another way, do fathers spend time with their young children in reading and writing activities?

Overall, early literacy experiences between fathers and their children were found to be significantly related to the amount of reading and writing fathers engage in alone (Table 3). It may be that fathers who read and write with some regularity, and who role model these practices capture the curiosity of their young children, who then establish routine joint activities. Children, after all, often seek their parents' attention by emulating their actions. They act-out activities that they see as important and occurring within their surrounding environment, for example, a child putting on her mother's shoes and hat or a

toddler carrying his father's lunch pail. What better opportunity, then, to gain mom and dad's attention-and approval- than to pick up a book or newspaper and pretend to read when observing this activity in others.

While it seems logical to conclude that the increase of father's personal reading and writing habits is related to more time spent in early literacy experiences with their children, the direction of causality is less clear-cut. Is the overall increase in joint literacy activity a result of fathers' initiating the interaction, or is it the children's interest in learning to read and write by asking fathers for assistance that is causing these occurrences? Or a combination of the two?

Table 3

**CORRELATIONS BETWEEN
FATHER AND CHILD LITERACY ACTIVITIES**

	<u>CONTEXT</u>	<u>FREQUENCY</u>
	Fathers alone within home	Fathers alone within home
Fathers alone outside home.	.391 ($p < .05$)	.552 ($p < .01$)
Fathers w/c within home.	.578 ($p < .01$)	.445 ($p < .05$)

Two demographic variables were found to be significantly related to fathers' literacy activities as well; length of time on the job ($r = .451$; $p < .05$), and prior job preparation ($t = -2.06$; $p < .05$). These findings suggest that fathers who have been on the job for certain periods of time (5 years +), and who have had some type of pre-job training prior to accepting the position tend to read and write more often than other fathers.

Marital Role Relation and Early Literacy Activity

Although fathers' literacy activities were unrelated to generation status and SES⁴, there was another interesting finding. Two groups of fathers were identified relative to their role functions within the family. The first set of fathers tended to share child care tasks with their wives. For example, both parents jointly cared for their children when ill or they both alternated in feeding them. Overall, "*shared*" function fathers assumed a major role in sharing three important, "intimate" child care responsibilities: nutrition, hygiene, and illness⁵.

The second set of fathers, primarily, divided child care tasks. For example, father oversaw disciplinary, recreational, and religious responsibilities. Mother assumed hygienic and nutritional tasks. These parents were referred to as "*divided*" function fathers.

The two sets of fathers were grouped according to their participation in the three "intimate" child care responsibilities where the majority of variance existed. T test analyses demonstrated that the differences were statistically significant ($t=-2.01$, $p<.05$; $t=-7.74$, $p<.01$; $t=-4.67$, $p<.01$, respectively).

Would there be role function differences relative to literacy activity? T tests demonstrated a modest level of significance ($t=1.55$, $p<.06$) between fathers literacy activity in the area of writing, relative to social contexts (e.g., recreation, library, religious, etc.), and "*shared*" role function. A larger difference ($t=2.40$, $p<.01$) was obtained by frequency of joint father-child literacy activities (i.e., reading and writing), and "*shared*" role function (Table 4). In general, in most

⁴A slight negative, non-significant correlation was observed between the amount of fathers' annual income, and joint father/child literacy activity.

⁵A total of 8 child care duties were examined: School, recreation, religion, discipline, creative activities, and the three listed above.

areas of literacy, there was a trend for "shared" function fathers to read and write alone, and with their children more often than "divided" function fathers. Also, from a comparison of mean differences, "shared" function fathers acquire more adult reading materials ($t=4.79$, $p<.01$), and children's literature ($p<ns$) than "divided" function fathers.

Table 4

Comparison of Role Functions by Context and Frequency of Literacy Activities: T test

		"shared" (N=14)	"divided" (N=12)			
Fa. alone* (inhome-write)	mean=	2.64	2.08	t= 1.55	DF= 24	p<.06
	std. dev.=	1.01	.79			
Fa. w/tc** (inhome-read & write)	mean=	1.86	1.25	t= 2.40	DF= 24	p<.01
	std. dev.=	.77	.45			

(1-tail)

*Analysis by context (i.e., work, library, school, religion, recreation, other)

**Analysis by frequency. (i.e., 1=1-2 x yr; 2=1-2 x mth; 3=1 x wk; 4=3-4 x wk; 5=daily)

Note! Mean scores for context analysis were obtained by assigning a 1 to each category that father responded yes, and summing the amount for each father in their respective groups.

DISCUSSION

Generation status, which was hypothesized to impact literacy activity, was unrelated to the amount of reading and writing fathers engage in. Demographic factors, such as length of time on the job, and prior job training had a more definitive relationship with literacy than length of U.S. residency.

Possibly the longer individuals are on the job the more responsibilities they are given which require additional reading and writing tasks, such as inter- and intra-company correspondence, equipment manuals, company related policies,

newsletters, memos, etc. It seems reasonable to assume that fathers with pre-occupation training as well have had more requirements-and opportunities-placed upon them to engage job related print.

A finding that was related to early literacy activity was the amount of reading and writing fathers engage in alone at home. Their use of print within a home and family context may encourage an environment that is conducive to member interaction and participation, particularly from children. Through this interaction, regular reading and writing routines may be established as part of the process of family "accommodation" (Gallimore, Weisner, Kaufman, & Bernheimer, 1989; Gallimore, Weisner, Guthrie, Bernheimer, & Nihira, in press).

Gallimore and his colleagues state that the participation of family members in various child care activities, such as fathers reading with their children may occur because it serves familial purposes in the overall schema of task assignments and performance. The process of accommodation requires that family members reorganize their plans, resources, constraints, time availability, goals and dreams, to establish a daily routine that is meaningful-and sustainable-over time. Thus, the simple act of a father reading a storybook to his daughter may be influenced by a number of intricately interconnected factors rather than by any one single issue (e.g., ideology, occupation, types of household, generation, etc.).

The non-significant findings between generation and literacy activity may have been due, in part, to the limited sample size, and/or the unequal numbers of fathers in each generation category. Or it may be that generation status simply has no relationship with father's reading and writing habits. Instead, there may be other factors determining where, when, how much, and with whom fathers engage literacy, for example, conjugal role relationships.

Research on parental role functions have demonstrated that men's involvement in household and child care tasks has increased within the past decades. Although sufficient to change the overall division of labor between family members, large numbers of men have yet to take on major responsibility for these roles (Berk & Berk, 1979; Berheide, 1984; Antill & Cotton, 1988; Lawrence, Draughn, Tasker, & Wozniak, 1987). In addition, the impact of parental role functions on children's behavior have yet to be fully explored, particularly as they relate to early literacy development.

Relative to Hispanic families, there has been an increase as well in participation by father's in tasks that have traditionally been assumed by mothers, such as washing dishes, cleaning the house, and bathing the children (Baca-Zinn, 1980; Cromwell & Ruiz, 1979; Ortiz, 1992; Vega, 1990). Wives entering the work force has, generally, been identified as a primary reason influencing increased parental task sharing.

What, then, is the relationship between paternal role function and early literacy practices? Although not focusing on role functions, Laosa (1982), in a study on the impact of parental schooling on parent-child teaching styles for Chicano and Anglo families, found that father's education level was significantly related to the amount of time they spend engaged in joint literacy activity with their children; the more education fathers had, the more time they spent reading to their children. Overall, when compared to a non-Hispanic, white sample, the Chicano parents had fewer years of schooling. Laosa suggests that the intellectual disadvantage observed among many ethnic minority children can be explained by the fact that ethnic minority parents, on the average, have attained fewer years of schooling than nonminority parents, thereby, engaging parent-child teaching styles that diverge from mainstream classroom practices.

In the present study, findings suggest that parental sharing of specific types of child care duties may be related to increased early literacy activity. "*Shared*" function fathers (i.e., parents who participate in various child care duties with their wives) were shown not only to acquire more adult and children's literature, but engaged in literacy activity alone, and with their children more often than "*divided*" function fathers (i.e., parents who divide child care tasks).

One reason may be that a secondary effect is taking place. Since "*shared*" function fathers spend, among other responsibilities, additional time with their children in nutrition, hygiene, and illness related tasks, literacy would be just one other activity in which to engage with their children.

Another reason is that "*shared*" function fathers may be comprised of avid readers who engage literacy in the presence of their children more often than "*divided*" function fathers, thus, prompting their children to question the purpose of reading and writing, and receiving, in return, a myriad of responses ranging from curt replies to the reading of entire story books.

Since this finding (i.e., father role functions) was a result of other investigations, a systematic method for evaluating contributing factors was not incorporated into this study. Further research is needed on assessing this phenomena. Future studies should focus on new and innovative methods of looking at literacy activity with regard to familial role functions not only between father and child but among all family members.

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